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Cycles of Knowing and Not-Knowing

Lucy Kimbell, Rats, and Art

Following a line of least resistance is not just a question of avoiding problems, but rather being guided by them.

—Martha Fleming, *From Le Musée des Sciences to the Science Museum*

A CARD, AN INVITATION, around four inches by six, printed on both sides. On the pink side, in a typeface sprouting elaborate arabesques, are the words *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*, and smaller text identifying this as the title of a “performance lecture” to be given by Lucy Kimbell at Camden Arts Centre in London on the evening of August 31, 2005. In it, she proposed to share “the results of her aesthetic experiments with rats” and announced: “Raising issues about ethics and aesthetics, this event will appeal both to those disgusted by rats and those disgusted by experiments on rats” (Figure 2.1). On the black side of the card, in the same typeface, where the glossy black arabesques seem to mimic rats’ tails, was the announcement of a *Rat Fair* in the same venue four days earlier. But this account already risks getting ahead of itself. The “rather beautiful” invitation card, as the artist rightly calls it, seems nevertheless to be an appropriate place to start because it’s one of the few tangible artifacts relating to this complex and fascinating but highly elusive art project.

Kimbell describes herself as “an artist and interaction designer” whose recent work “disturbs evaluation cultures in management, technology and the arts.”¹ *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* is in fact her only animal-themed project to date, though the project’s concern with how rats get enmeshed in human evaluation cultures certainly connects

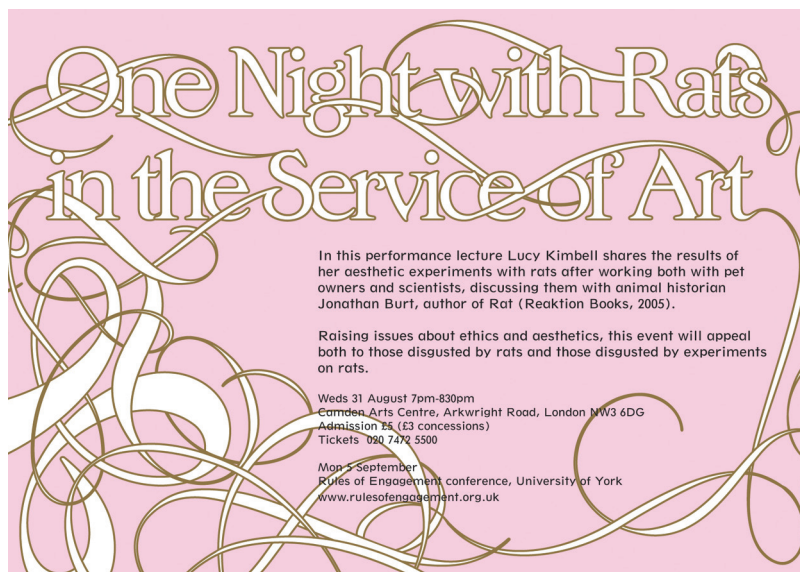


Figure 2.1. Lucy Kimbell, *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*, invitation card, 2005.

it to other aspects of her art and design practice. After the initial delivery of the performance lecture in August 2005, versions have been given on at least four other occasions.² The interview with the artist on which this chapter draws was conducted immediately after the version delivered at Goldsmiths College, London, in 2006.

The performance lecture is in part a description of the nature of Kimbell's art practice, and of the ways in which it figured in this particular project.³ Having to explain in meetings and telephone conversations with all manner of people with an interest in rats that she was "a practice-based researcher"—hardly the most self-explanatory term to those not involved in the contemporary arts—she summarized her side of such conversations as follows: "The outcomes of my research might be performances, events, yes, artworks. These can be art. No, no drawings, no photographs, no paintings, no sculptures. No, no installations." For the benefit of the lecture audience, she explained:

In previous projects I have referred to what I do as “somewhere between Bad Social Science and live art.” Social scientists in particular seemed to appreciate what I did because it resembled what they did, but using bastardized methodologies, using humour and failure. Instead of the problematic but currently dominant category “sci-art,” I could say I make social-sci-art. I create unregulated process.⁴

Like a lot of her interactive projects, *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* was very much “about showing the entanglements,” as she puts it, between its various elements.⁵ In this case those elements included her encounters with rats and various groups of humans, from laboratory scientists to the so-called ratters who keep and display fancy rats as a hobby, as well as animal rights activists and art audiences. What would happen, she wondered, to her understanding of the widespread human distaste for rats as she moved between these people’s spaces, bringing together “different kinds of knowledge, desire and disgust”? This was to be her “aesthetic experiment.”⁶

A Poem, and the First of Several Drawings

Disarmingly, Kimbell’s performance lecture begins with a forty-two-line “cute” poem about one of her early visits to a mouse and rat show, the tone of which is clear enough from the first four lines of the final stanza:

And this is what I took away
The sound of rats, the sound of play
People playing, with each other
The rats a sort of rodent cover⁷

Its principal formal purpose in the lecture seems to be to wrong-foot any and all of its likely academic audiences, as cute rhyming couplets have no more legitimacy in the discourse of contemporary art than they do in that of science.

From there, however, the lecture moves to the first mention of a particular drawing—a drawing by an artist who proposes to make “no

drawings, no photographs, no paintings.” Kimbell introduces it as “a piece of work I want to make but have not yet been able to make”:

It’s called the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* or REA. I did this drawing more than a year ago and I imagined it as a gallery piece, sitting on tables, with many tubes and wheels, a closed environment for rats and for the spectators who might watch them, offering diversions and decision points for rats, and diversions and decision points for humans.⁸

The rats’ decisions, as they selected which routes to take through this enclosed maze, were to include aesthetic evaluations as to whether this artwork was *itself* something “beautiful,” or “mildly interesting,” or “sensationalist” (Figure 2.2). Simultaneously flippant and serious from the outset, this was another example of her working, as she says, “somewhere between Bad Social Science and live art.”

Here, as in so many other instances of contemporary art with animal concerns of one kind or another, it is important to hold back from judging too quickly any “ethical” (or unethical) stance that the work may seem to adopt. In this particular case, it’s important to understand both the place of the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* in the overall trajectory of the *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* project, and the journey through her ideas and experiences on which Kimbell will take her audience in the course of the performance lecture. To ask whether the project is actually about rats, or merely about art, is to ask the wrong kind of question.

The drawn, collaged, and written elements that make up the REA “drawing” date from early or mid-2004. Over the next two years, Kimbell’s ideas for the realization of this artwork hardly changed at all, other than realizing that she couldn’t bring herself to make it. In conversation, she described it thus:

The *Rat Evaluated Artwork* is conceived of as a gallery installation which is physical in form, perhaps with some digital add-ons or bits of electronics that apparently measure or track a rat’s movement within it . . . but it’s really conceived of as a visual art piece, so it *is* an artwork. It requires, in that conception of it, a live animal or live animals to be in it, to move through

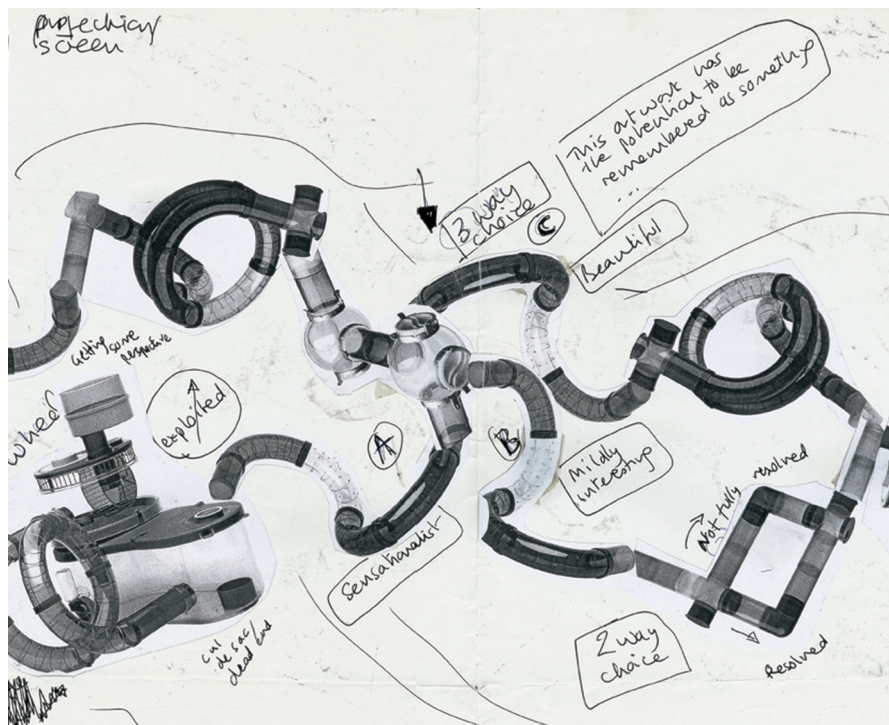


Figure 2.2. Lucy Kimbell, *Rat Evaluated Artwork* (detail), 2005.

the tubes and various decision-points while an audience is there . . . to observe those movements and decisions, and also to see these faintly ridiculous attached meanings, and I still want to do it in a way—that’s my lack, or loss, that I can’t quite bring myself to do it.

The acronym REA is, she acknowledged, a deliberate punning reference to the RAE, the national Research Assessment Exercise that at that time evaluated all academic research in British universities and funded it accordingly. And the role of the “ridiculous” in her REA’s strategies of evaluation would undoubtedly have struck a chord with her audience’s experience of the RAE’s attempt to regulate knowledge, inquiry, and creativity.

Punning aside, Kimbell’s account of this projected artwork raises important themes that will each call for attention in due course: the nature

of art's distinctive contribution to cultural knowledge about animals; the circumstances of living animals in works of contemporary art; the role of the ridiculous in formations of knowledge; and the work of loss.

Knowing about Not-Knowing

Kimbell's attentiveness to her working methods allows her to be surprisingly forthright about the limitations of her knowledge. In the performance lecture she announces early on that "I knew nothing about rats other than that they were both objects of disgust and fear in Western culture and objects of respect—as survivors, fast breeders, quick adaptors."⁹

At the point where she started contacting scientists, however, she was fully conscious that the two-year university fellowship and the research council funding she had secured to support the project were seen as validating her inquiry, even when expressed in terms such as these: "Hello, I just want to know what you know about rats. Hello, I don't even know what I want to know exactly but will you let me be here and watch and ask some questions?" It was essentially this same open and wide-eyed (but far from naive) approach that paid off in Kimbell's early contact with some of the ratters. In the autumn of 2004 she paid several visits to the home of a woman in Essex who owned some rats: "She had agreed to let me try to train them aesthetically. Neither of us was clear what this meant."¹⁰

Reporting on these early contacts with both ratters and scientists, Kimbell tells her audience:

I had noticed myself using the term "experimental" as in . . . "I'm not sure what I'm doing—it's a kind of experiment." It was a way of avoiding saying what I *was* doing, since I didn't know what that was, and so far, no one had challenged me. Within practice-based research, you can get away with quite a lot. You are allowed not to know, for quite a lot longer than you are elsewhere in the world.¹¹

In reality, of course, this has nothing to do with "getting away with" anything. As an artist operating without confident access to the skills and traditions of a conventional artists' medium (such as painting or photography),

her projects have no obvious formal starting point: “In a sense, like anyone else, I’m just trying to understand the world, or look at the world and create some meaning for myself . . . and because I have always crossed disciplinary boundaries, I kind of feel that I don’t have a claim to any one knowledge.” Finding herself sixteen months into the two-year fellowship before she felt clear as to what she was actually doing, she reports: “I was quite anxious through this project, it wasn’t easy being in this place”—although, at the same time, “sometimes I loved it.”

Getting into Other People’s Worlds

One Night with Rats in the Service of Art repeatedly reflects on the nature of Kimbell’s own practice: “I seemed to have this liberty as a practice-based researcher; but what was it that I was researching, other than my ability to get into things, like buildings with animal rights protestors outside?”¹²

Part of an answer might be that she was researching her way around obstacles such as the need to conceptualize and articulate the project—“probably too early on”—to secure funding for it. One early funding application included the explanation: “By setting up activities that resemble (but differ from) the activities of scientists and breeders, the artist wants to illuminate the ambiguities within rat breeding and experimentation and reveal philosophical questions about what makes us human and rats animals.” Its philosophical and hierarchical presumptions exemplify her tendency to operate in what she engagingly calls “Stalinist super-project mode” in the early stages of research.

To move on from this rather defensive and calculating manner of operating, a casting-off of confidence and preparation was necessary. In its place came something more open. As she explains:

This is the thing about practice: once I started actually forcing myself *to do* something, like going to that woman’s house in Essex, where I just forced myself to go, it made it tangible and real and vivid and meaningful, through practice. . . . I was just *doing a thing*, and seeing what it was like. And that moves you forward, not the design, not the conceptualization of it.

The refrain of doing something simply *to see what it was like*, to see what happened, is an important reflection of Kimbell's curiosity-driven approach. Without reading anything specific into the coincidence, the words call to mind Jacques Derrida's famous observation about the striking manner in which his own cat, free of philosophical agendas, seemed to look at him: "just to see" [*juste pour voir*].¹³

Seeking to explain why her research for the rat project took her both into scientific laboratories and into rat shows, Kimbell's immediate response was: "It seemed important to go and be in both and see what happened." Of both of these environments, she has observed, "I was amazed about how far people let me go into their worlds." She found the ratters' world "a closed community although quite welcoming," and also found the scientists she encountered to be helpful, especially the experimental psychologist Rob Deacon, who works on rodent behavior and became actively involved in aspects of her project. Asked about whether these different worlds shared any of their knowledge, she responded:

I don't think they do, very much, which was why I did very quickly become interested in the *practices* of these two groups that I looked at in depth. . . . I was particularly struck when talking to the ratters by how much biological knowledge they had, and some home-made animal psychology. Some of those people breed rats, and try and bring out particular lines, in the way that dog breeders do. So there's a sort of homespun science. I did interview somebody about this, and I said, so, where do you find out about things? She said "from the literature," and what she meant was rat journals, not scientific journals.

According to Kimbell, Deacon, on the other hand, was "actually very interested in, and recognized, the kinds of intimacy and knowledge that owners and breeders would have."

In contrast to her work with scientists and ratters, Kimbell's involvement with animal rights activists was slight. Because of her discussions with Deacon, who was based at Oxford University, and her awareness—in the light of the SPEAK group's sustained campaign opposing the building of a new animal lab on that city's South Parks Road—of what she perceived as the "likely or possible risks to animal scientists who explicitly

experiment on animals,” she felt somewhat uncomfortable about how to engage with activists “as somebody not making clear a critical position.” Eventually she decided to attend a SPEAK rally in Oxford in July 2005 that had been organized to mark the one-year anniversary of the university’s decision to stop building work on the proposed animal lab.¹⁴ She reports that she “felt very mixed there, because I was there ambiguously, a bit like I was at the other events”:

So on the one hand I was very moved, in particular by one of the speakers who was talking about his experience of working in an animal lab with primates, and it was very upsetting, it was very distressing to hear what happened to those animals, and the way he described it you could not but be moved by these stories. But at the same time somehow it wasn’t an open debate. So I didn’t come away feeling resolved about what I thought, but I knew I had somehow to make that present in the project.

The last point is in many respects the crucial one: “I knew I had somehow to make that present in the project.” Her expectations were perhaps unrealistic (an animal rights rally is not the most likely forum for an “open debate” weighing the arguments for or against animal experimentation), and her actions (taking notes and photographs) apparently caused some concern. Asked whether she was a journalist, her reply that she was an artist may not have been the most reassuring one, and she was probably wise to resist saying (as she had to the ratters and scientists) that she was interested in conducting “aesthetic experiments” with rats! Nevertheless, the point of the research was to feed into her work, to make those ideas “present in the project.”

As with many aspects of the performance lecture *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*, this is done with both a lightness of touch and with surprising shifts of tone that betray little if anything of her discomfort. “I joined the rally to hear what was being said,” she begins. “It was like a summer fete where the cakes were all vegan.” Within half a dozen lines, however, the lecture’s language has changed markedly:

Here we are, our bodies protected over the years by vaccinations and drugs most of which were probably tested on animals. . . . My body, your bodies,

are a charnelhouse; stacked in it are the corpses of millions of rats and mice and guinea pigs and fish and birds and cats and dogs and primates used by doctors and scientists over hundreds of years.¹⁵

These shifts of tone, and the jolts that they can occasionally deliver, are made possible by the episodic and almost epigrammatic structure of the lecture. Its circlings, refrains, and juxtapositions belie the artist's clarity of purpose.

The Rat Fair . . .

Early on in the lecture, Kimbell asks in relation to her proposed *Rat Evaluated Artwork*: "Could it be beautiful as well as disturbing, as well as problematic, as well as funny, as well as politically incorrect, as well as entertaining as well as compelling as well as unusual as well as shocking as well as all the other things that projects like this can be?" Its complexity and instability were simultaneously its strength and its weakness. And returning to the REA midway through the lecture, its precariousness becomes more apparent: "If these visits to labs and rat shows and protests were research, the knowledge I was producing was rapidly erasing the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*." As her worldly advisers from various rat worlds had advised her, the problems with having busy decision-making rats scurrying around a tubular maze in front of a gallery audience were multiple. Rats are nocturnal and "'not known for having a Protestant work ethic,' as one scientist put it." She also began to question whether it was "acceptable to have live animals on display in a gallery for the consumption of audiences," quite apart from the question of what she would do with the rats after the show.¹⁶

The idea for a more ambitious project with rats "came directly out of the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*" and prompted Kimbell's early visits to rat shows and conversations with scientists. "I was initially thinking there would be a live event, a performance lecture live event with some rats in it," she has said, but a series of conversations with Camden Arts Centre led to an invitation to stage some kind of rat event as part of its plans to draw in a wide public on a summer public holiday weekend. This was to be the *Rat Fair*, an event distinct from but directly related to the performance lecture.

The *Rat Fair* drew about 450 visitors who, between them, brought along forty of their own rats. A kind of affectionate spoof on rat shows, it was reviewed in positive terms by the editor of the National Fancy Rat Society's magazine *Pro-Rat-a*,¹⁷ and attended not only by ratters but also by a wider public that was by no means limited to the center's usual audience. Intended to be "more fun" than a typical rat show, where "the major activity . . . is *judging*, having a table with a white-coated judge and having this system of evaluating each of these rats,"¹⁸ the *Rat Fair*'s attractions and activities included rat face painting (on human faces), a Rat Beauty Parlour (Figure 2.3), and a "Where's the nearest rat?" map of Camden. Items for sale included what the editor of *Pro-Rat-a* called "wonderful knitted garments with holes designed in them for rats to snuggle in," but as her review acknowledged: "The 'Is your rat an artist?' competition was the chief focus of interest" (Figure 2.4).¹⁹

Figure 2.3. "Rat Beauty Parlour" at Lucy Kimbell's *Rat Fair*, Camden Arts Centre, 2005. Photograph courtesy of the artist.





Figure 2.4. "Is Your Rat an Artist?" Drawing competition at Lucy Kimbell's *Rat Fair*, Camden Arts Centre, 2005. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

... and Nineteen Rat Drawings

The "Is your rat an artist?" competition invited participant ratters at the *Rat Fair* playfully to explore the extent to which their own rats might have unrecognized artistic potential. A webcam was suspended over what the review in *Pro-Rat-a* called "a large pen . . . filled with wood chip, Perspex tubes and wooden objects which rats liked to stand upright on to try to peer over the sides."²⁰ This "drawing area," as Kimbell calls it, allowed each rat to operate "as a kind of computer mouse" producing a drawing that was "literally a trace of where the rat moved." These drawings were then judged by Jenni Lomax, director of Camden Arts Centre (Figure 2.5), to decide which one should win "the world's first Rat Art Award."²¹



Figure 2.5. Jenni Lomax judges drawings at Lucy Kimbell's *Rat Fair*, Camden Arts Centre, 2005. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

For Kimbell, this is not just an exercise in absurdist aesthetics: she doesn't actually regard the rats as artists, as such, but each rat's agency is of some significance. Unlike a computer mouse, the rat "makes the decisions herself. She chooses her own path." In that sense, Kimbell interestingly remarks in the lecture, the drawings "are perhaps best thought of as portraits of curiosity. . . . Openings, tunnels, corridors and holes are all of interest to the artist-rat."²²

Kimbell's subsequent thoughts on the drawings and the "system" that enabled their production illustrate the complexity of her engagement with the whole project and of the place of living rats in that project. Of the nineteen drawings made at the *Rat Fair* over four or five hours (each rat being given around ten minutes to move at will around the pen), she says:

I can't really see the drawings on their own, as objects, without seeing the enclosure, the webcam above it, the fact that that's attached to some specially written software, and remembering the way that I worked with a particular young designer group, called Something, and a rat owner, Sheila Sowter, and her rats, to prototype and test it. The drawings are the output of that, but I think of that whole system as a piece. It was led by me, but involved collaboration: I couldn't make it on my own.

The *status* of the drawings themselves is certainly wide open to conflicting interpretations. The animal historian Jonathan Burt, who was close to completing his monograph *Rat* at the time of the *Rat Fair*,²³ was invited by Kimbell to be a respondent at the Camden version of her performance lecture, and in conversation the following year he reflected on the relation of the “Is your rat an artist?” drawing system to other rat-related art that he discusses in his book. He praised the project as a whole as “a piece that worked very well with rats . . . being built around the particularity of the creature,” not least because “the rat is a route-finder that spends its whole time moving through networks”—a point that he acknowledged had much in common with Kimbell’s own mode of operation in this project.²⁴ But in drawing an analogy with the *MEART* (Multi Electrode Array aRT) project developed in the early 2000s, he expressed certain reservations concerning the nature of the art being produced in both cases.

“MEART—the Semi Living Artist,” as described on the website of the SymbioticA Research Group that developed and hosted it, “is a geographically detached, bio-cybernetic research and development project exploring aspects of creativity and artistry in the age of new biological technologies.”²⁵ Summarizing the project in *Rat*, Burt explains that it involved “radical hybridization of rat and machine.” Neurons from an embryonic rat cortex in Atlanta, Georgia, were stimulated by a webcam filming the movement of gallery visitors, and a signal was sent by computer from the stimulated neurons to a robotic arm that then “draws pictures” in Perth, Western Australia, which the rat neurons back in the United States could “see” through further input they received. As Burt notes, however, the animal body is here so “completely disarticulated” that “it probably makes little sense to talk of the rat in this instance.”²⁶

The link between *MEART* and Kimbell’s “drawing system” is simply that rats figure in both and that “drawings” are produced by both. Like Kimbell, the SymbioticA group seems fascinated by possible scenarios “in which science and art are integrated,” as Burt puts it. Although he insists that he intends no criticism of Kimbell’s wider project, Burt’s observation is that in both of these unusual examples of drawing-production “the art is really quite simple, because it’s just a response to movement.”²⁷ But Kimbell’s rat-generated drawings are *not* in any very useful sense “the art” in *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*. And in contrast to what Burt

sees as the rat's effective absence from the *MEART* project, the presence of rats—or rather art's making-present of rats—will turn out to be central to Kimbell's project.

On the question of the conceptual shift from the original idea for the enclosed *Rat Evaluated Artwork* to the *Rat Fair*'s "open" drawing system, Kimbell responded as follows to the challenge that the latter seemed little more than a physical manifestation of the former, but *without the confining tubes*:

Yes, except it's less stupid. The point about the REA is that it's ridiculous, whereas the "Is your rat an artist?" drawing system is not ridiculous, and also it inherits directly from science. Of course, all evaluations inherit from attempts by institutions to capture and define and constrain activity of different kinds, so the REA is a kind of scientific mechanism, but the "Is your rat an artist?" drawing system came directly from seeing the Morris water maze being used with an overhead camera and some specific scientific software for watching and tracking how an animal moved, what segment it spent most time in, and so on.

The Morris water maze, designed by the neuroscientist Richard G. Morris, is still widely used as a behavioral procedure to test rats' spatial memory. In the experiment, a rat that has been given drugs such as receptor blockers is repeatedly lowered into a small circular pool of water that has no local cues such as scent traces, and its attempts to escape by finding a submerged platform are tracked on camera prior to analysis of the progress of its spatial learning.²⁸ Kimbell makes the point that her own nonwatery enclosure is thus "a direct appropriation from a scientific technology which is well tested and has been used extensively within experimental psychology," and that this is one of the means by which the worlds of the scientists and the ratters are juxtaposed in her project.

Thinking further about the relation of her two rat "art" environments—the REA and the "Is your rat an artist?" drawing system—she acknowledges certain points of connection, ranging from stupidity to the entanglements of agency. Of the drawing system, she concedes "it is a *bit* stupid," and after a pause in which she thinks back to the REA's proposed "diversions and decision points" both for rats and for humans, she resumes:

Yes, no, it *is* similar, because also definitely built into “Is your rat an artist?” is the idea that software *and* human *and* rat agency are all involved and intertwined and you can’t separate them, because the owner is trying to entice the rat to move in a particular way, maybe, or some of them sat there trying to hover by the edge to reassure their animal that it was OK, and then the rat was maybe a bit nervous and lurked in that area, you can see that clearly in some of the pictures, the rat is just hanging out in one area, that’s because their owner or human companion was there. And in the REA, it’s the same, the human audience would have some impact on the rats, even though it’s enclosed.

The difference between the pieces, in the end, comes down to the shift in Kimbell’s thinking about rats themselves. Still on the subject of the REA, she continues: “But actually, now I know more about rats, they wouldn’t like being in there, so it is impossible, given my current sort of ‘ethical’ position if I had to define it.” The difference, in other words, is that for her as an artist in 2005 the “Is your rat an artist?” drawing system was *makeable*, whereas much as she still hankered to find a way to make it, the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* was not.

Aesthetics, Beauty, and Ethics

One of the decision points—the “ridiculous” decision points—in the proposed *Rat Evaluated Artwork*’s tubular maze is a junction where one route suggests that the rat has decided that this artwork entails “ethical dilemmas” and the alternative suggests that it entails “no ethical dilemmas” (Figure 2.6). And near the end of the performance lecture, Kimbell asks of the REA (though with little sense of them being remotely answerable questions): “Could it work aesthetically but not ethically? Could it work ethically but not aesthetically?”²⁹

In conversation, similarly, she uses the terms *ethics* and *aesthetics* with caution. This is partly because the *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* project doesn’t have an explicit ethical agenda, and partly because the kind of artist she considers herself to be is not, first and foremost, a visual artist—a point that also has relevance to her ideas about beauty. Asked about what kind of aesthetic dimension there might be to the rat drawings

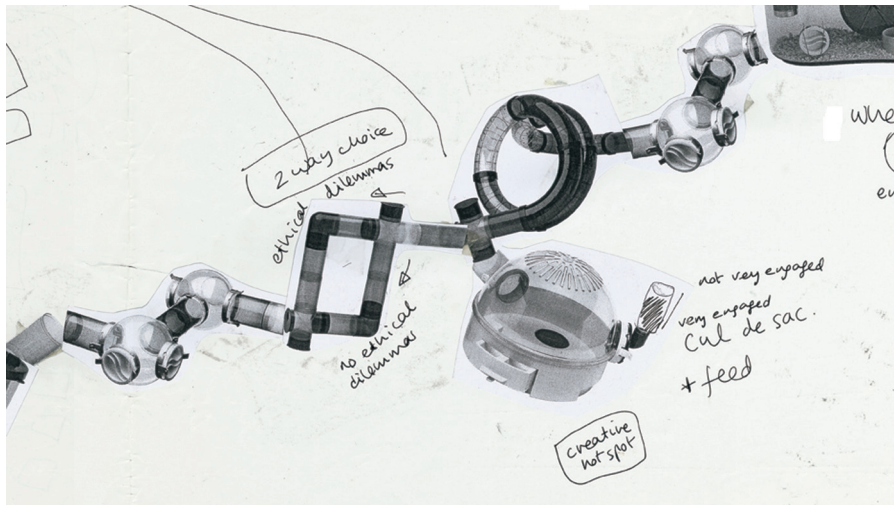


Figure 2.6. Lucy Kimbell, *Rat Evaluated Artwork* (detail), 2005.

and to the REA, she responded: “I never really have a clear idea what aesthetics means.” Nevertheless, she acknowledged that in “adding these layers of reflexivity, and criticality, and messiness” within many of her projects—qualities that in her view “actually don’t find a lot of success within the art world, but social scientists completely love them”—her work certainly does “have an aesthetic.”

This became clearer in her response to a supplementary question about whether ideas of beauty had any place in her work. Unlike other contemporary artists whose work on animal themes, though often far from conventionally beautiful, is strongly motivated by a conviction about the beauty of the animals themselves, Kimbell is clear that in this project she “wasn’t interested in asserting some beauty in the rat.” As she explained:

I have a strong interest in beauty but I see it as made manifest in sets of relations. . . . I doubt that I used the word beauty when I talked to the ratters or the scientists. I presented them with my ambiguities, my uncertainties, my anxieties, and I used this word *experimental* which I referred to in the talk, so, “aesthetic experiments,” that was my little loose label, but not beauty, because that would be, I imagined, a step too far for them, to see beauty in these relations that I was imagining and building.

Here, interestingly, beauty is understood as something that can indeed be *made* by the artist, but made from not-knowing, from vulnerability, from precariousness. The idea is not dissimilar to Isabelle Stengers's comment on an audience's "wonder" at "the skill of a dancer, understanding how close her gracious moves take her to the risk of falling down, seeing in the dance how close together the double possibility of harmony and failure come." And for Stengers, the individual's figuring out (and acting out) of how to proceed in such circumstances—which "is always . . . a selective and demanding creation"—is as close as she wants to get to a "definition" of ethics.³⁰ In the question period after the Goldsmiths lecture, Kimbell herself commented, "I tried to show how perplexed I was *in the doing*," and when asked directly about ethics and aesthetics her response was "I don't know what I mean by these terms" and, more than that, "I don't want to have an answer to what they are." If any single remark epitomizes both the confidence and the integrity of her project, it's probably that one.

Cold Language, Warm Language

Meeting Kimbell for the first time in 2004, while she was still in "Stalinist super-project mode," there were no clues that an attentiveness to the emotional power of language would come to lie at the heart of her performance lecture. Her "charnelhouse" metaphor has already been remarked on, but it's preceded in the lecture by several comments about science's linguistic distancing of the animal body. She comments on a PowerPoint slide showing "a small creature, alive, but alive for science. Ordered from a catalogue, No Name animal, an instrumentalized animal." She notes the Charles River company describing itself as "a 'provider of animal models.' Not animals. Animal models," and she remarks more generally on language that allows scientists to "maintain a distance from the live flesh they work with. In lectures some scientists refer to an animal prepared for a demonstration as a 'surgical preparation' instead of a rat."³¹

The form of Kimbell's lecture gives her an opportunity directly to counter this scientific usage with what might best be described as *warm language*. There are numerous examples, most effective when they're least expected. The list of facilities she had visited ends with the comment:

“Gated communities of scientists and live and dead bits of science, hearts still warm in their hands.” And flicking through pages from the Charles River catalog, she observes: “Rats, it seems, don’t really exist in science, although there are millions of hot breathing bodies boxed in laboratories all over the world.”³²

What Kimbell is doing here is nothing as straightforward as deliberately aligning herself with an animal rights position, or indeed of adopting a simplistic antiscience position. It is a matter, rather, of attending to the distinctive modes of operation that her status as “a practice-based researcher” made available to her. This can perhaps be shown most clearly through contrast with an academic approach to similar material. In his book *Rat*, for example, Burt observes:

there is a parallel between the rat fancy and the development of rat breeds for laboratory science; not only are they two sides of an interconnected practice, but at present fancy rats derive mainly from laboratory stock. Thus scientists manipulate the rat’s body for purposes of experimentation, while devotees and admirers of the rat do so for purposes of exhibition and personal satisfaction. In both instances, the aim is to create an “ideal” rat, whatever the purpose.³³

Kimbell may find little with which to disagree in this passage, but her own commentary on her direct experience of individual scientists and individual judges at rat shows finds more complex and (for want of a better word) humane common ground between them, and works to deny her audience any easy opportunity to demonize them. Of the very first rat show she visited, she reports: “The judge’s comments punctuated the day. Good tail. Good head and ears. Let’s have a look at you then. Cooing, hello sweetheart. Good tail. Good type. Ooh I do like you as well. Ooh you are a messy boy, poo all over you.” Elsewhere in the lecture she speaks of being in one laboratory with a rat, “sweet in its box, enjoying being handled by the professor, enjoying being caressed and stroked and cuddled, here, did I want a go, did I want to hold it? I held science in my hands.”³⁴

This use of an embodied or embodying language, which has the general effect of making present (even in their physical absence) the rats’

aliveness, is, Kimbell acknowledged, “quite deliberate.” In response to a comment about its further effect of making human responsibility to the rats evident, she agreed: “Yes, absolutely, I was conscious of that when I was writing those things.” Sometimes the strategy is as simple as asking the same question of herself as of the rat. The sentence in the lecture that follows “I held science in my hands” reads: “Actually it looked pretty small and I wondered how would it cope if I was able, if I was allowed to make the REA and get rats to crawl through it. How *I* would cope.”³⁵

To borrow the words of the human geographer Nigel Thrift, from his essay on the practice rather than the abstract principles of ethics, this is a matter of the artist “allowing affects themselves to communicate, as well as ideas.” Thrift acknowledges the practice of research to be “a profoundly emotional business” that is frequently experienced as “a curious mixture of humiliations and intimidations mixed with moments of insight and even enjoyment,” especially when it involves encounters or interactions with others.³⁶ In exploring “what a ‘good’ encounter might consist of,” he is fiercely critical of the “tapestry of ethical regulation” that leads university ethics committees—contrary to every creative impulse of research practice—to assume “that there is only one way of proceeding” and that their proper role is “to render the ethical outcomes of research encounters predictable.”³⁷ In praising, instead, forms of improvisatory research practice that “perform a space of thoughtfulness and imagination,”³⁸ his words again come remarkably close to describing the encounter staged in Kimbell’s performance lecture.

The Work of Loss

The artist notes that “rats do not live long in human years” and that discussion of illness and death “is part of the way ratters talk to each other,” but her own introduction of the notion of “loss” relates to the work that she sees *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* setting out to do. And she’s quite clear that “it is doing some work”:

It’s trying to expose the audience not just to the thinking process, but to the lack-of-thinking process that’s involved in a project like this. . . . so it’s

aiming to take an audience through a story of the cycles of knowing and not knowing that are involved in making something, and the reflexivity is important to show the sense of looking at it at the same time as doing it. It requires work from them to go through that narrative with me when I'm telling the story but also to do the work of coping with the ambiguity, because I don't answer various things. . . . It maintains this ambiguity, which is I think very much part of art and design practice. . . . And it is a kind of work, I offer them a loss: I'm saying, I can't do this project, here's a project I'd like to do, I can't do it, and I'm not going to do it, here's lots of reasons, and you can't have it either.

She is talking here most directly about the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*, of which she says toward the end of the performance lecture: "It's a piece of work I want to make but am not able to make. I can't make it because I can't put live animals into a gallery piece, to make them into this kind of spectacle . . . and anyway they would sleep, or sit in the corner instead of wandering round. It wouldn't work."³⁹

Immediately before showing images of the *Rat Fair* in the lecture, she posed the question of whether she could show "rat as rat" rather than as pet or as scientific model, and whether it would be possible to bring together the "knowledges" of these very different rat worlds. The answer, in her view, was itself an enacting of loss: "Because the *Rat Fair* is the answer, the event was the answer, and if you didn't go, then, you get something from the images but it's not the same as being in that room in that moment, in its *liveness*." Much the same was true of the delivery of the performance lecture: "The liveness of that *is* the answer, that *there is no answer*, and that you can't really separate them"—the answer and the impossibility of delivering it more fully—"they're entwined, like we're entwined with the animals, and the science is entwined with the ratting world even though they might not have a direct dialogue."

A Place of Ambiguity

Once the decision had been taken that the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* could not responsibly be made—because any living rat it used "would still be

an instrumentalized animal. Rat for art's sake"—why did the project as a whole continue to be called *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*?⁴⁰ Kimbell says of the title:

I like it because it suggests there might actually be rats *there*. It brings that fear, so it is provocative. I think "in the service of art" is useful because I'm ultimately claiming this as an art project and therefore there is a home for it. I'm not saying it's philosophy—it has a home, so I name that home. It seemed right . . . and it makes me laugh.

One Night with Rats in the Service of Art might be said to be the sum of its entanglements. It is purposeful, curious, and comfortable enough with the limitations of its grip on things. "I wonder what knowledge, if any, was produced here?" the artist muses toward the end of the lecture. "What came out of these aesthetic experiments?"⁴¹

Reflecting on Kimbell's project, Burt has said: "It's not confused, that's not the right word, it's crossover, it's mixed, its directions in the end are uncertain, but the reason isn't the project, it's because of the animal that she's chosen":

The rat as a figure, in terms of the history of its representation in the West, is something that eats through things, and collapses a lot of boundaries, and also *unpicks* language and thought. . . . What she's doing, in the end, is reproducing something that's quintessentially what the history of the rat has always been about, which is erosion, and in a sense this creature is determining much more the project than even she is perhaps appreciating.⁴²

His nagging discomfort with the project's open-endedness is something that Kimbell might appreciate, but would not necessarily share. In its aims, at least, *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* is modest, and exploratory: it is not, to borrow Thrift's words again, "some grandiose reformulation of the whole basis of western moral thinking." But it may indeed have some relation to the "new ethical spaces" that Thrift envisages arising from attempts, "often for a very short span of time, to produce a different sense of how things might be, using the resources to hand."⁴³

For Kimbell, accepting and embracing the space of her own not-knowing about rats served as just such a resource. There is a moment in the performance lecture when she says something very telling about one particular encounter with a scientist. Taken out of that specific context, her comment effectively encapsulates how her practice-based approach might engage—and allow others to engage—with the experience of the more-than-human world: “What I had to do at that point was hold open a place of ambiguity and be there in it.”⁴⁴